

SOME BLUEBIRD BOXES AND TROUBLES.

BY FRANK BRUEN.

THE writer saw a statement somewhere, that Bluebirds would build in a swinging box, but the English Sparrow would not. Thinking this statement important, if true, and wishing to see the Bluebirds more plentiful about town, he determined to test the matter by putting up a swinging box in his back yard.

A box of ordinary boards was made (some eight inches cube) and suspended from an arm nailed to the clothes pole, that being the nearest approach to a tree back of the brick block. The arm was 4 or 5 feet long and shaved to a sharp edge on top as a defense against the numerous cats thereabouts. The hole, an inch and a half in diameter, was placed well towards the top, and a wire nail below the hole made a good perch.

I made no record of the date the box was placed, but know it was in March when the Bluebirds came in force. A reference to my note book gives March 14th as the first day any considerable number were seen—two weeks after the first arrivals.

A pair of Bluebirds found the box in a day or two and tried to get in, seeming to care little for the swinging motion. It was soon plain that the hole was too small (it had been made one and a fourth inch first) so this was enlarged to one and a half inch strong, the Bluebirds finding no trouble then to enter.

They were in no hurry to begin active operations, but inspected the box very often and staid near by for perhaps a week, before begining to build. Then the English Sparrows began to be interested in the box and would carry in stuff when the Bluebirds were out of sight. The Bluebirds worked some now and drove the Sparrows away whenever they saw them. The Sparrows were very persevering, however, and worked every chance they had.

This exploded the idea that the sparrows were afraid of the swinging motion. Knowing the Bluebirds would be worried into leaving in time, I placed a trigger over the hole and carried a string to the house and waited for a sparrow to go in. This happened very soon and a sharp pull made him a prisoner. In taking the box down to dispose of the pest, I accidentally hit the trigger and the sparrow was out in a second. The sparrow is a wise bird, and one lesson was enough for him. I had no chance to catch another.

I cleaned out the box, but fear it was a mistake, for the nest foundation was most of it the work of the Bluebirds. The male Bluebird saw me catch the sparrow, but was in the box two minutes after I hung it up again.

At this time my neighbor put up a nice little fixed box and the fickle Bluebirds left my homely box and took possession of his. But the sparrows who had just been deprived of a fine bird box near by, came in force and my neighbor laid for them with an air gun and succeeded in killing one after which the Bluebirds became firmly installed.

May 15th the parent birds began feeding the young and May 31st took out their brood of five.

A very few moments after the birds left the sparrows were fighting for the box and my neighbor made a trap of it and caught and killed seven cock sparrows all belonging to a band of freebooters who seemed to have no family ties. June 3rd the Bluebirds were back for a time with four of the young, and about this time a pair of House Wrens, that had been nesting near by, came along and wanted the box. She or he or both in turn began "firing" the old nest material out in a very vigorous manner, but left when the Bluebirds appeared. The Bluebirds did not go in, but evidently wanted the box. My neighbor then cleaned the box out and the Bluebirds were in possession very soon, while the wrens took another box which my neighbor put up in a white oak on his place.

The Bluebirds—the female being the only one in evidence most of the time—finished the nest, laid a second set of

eggs, and they were nearly incubated when the female abandoned the nest and after a few days disappeared. My neighbor took the box down soon afterwards and found no eggs. Here was a mystery, for he knew the bird had been incubating a set of eggs and knew they could not yet have hatched. The mystery was cleared up by a similar case.

My bird chum had put up boxes in his large yard and one was occupied by a family of wrens and two others by sparrows whom he systematically robbed as soon as a new set of eggs was laid. He moved a sparrow box and hung it on the fence temporarily when a pair of Bluebirds came along and took possession and laid a set of eggs. The box was moved to a tree to get it away from cats. The set of four eggs were almost ready to hatch when all disappeared but one and that was pierced. Of course we declared at once that the "British" had done it and declared war. We went to the box and found the other eggs under it, almost fully incubated—pierced. My friend put a set of sparrow's eggs in the nest and the next day they were gone. This rather non-plussed us, but another set was put in, and the wren was caught in the act of disposing of them. This was a hard blow to us, with whom Jenny had always been a favorite, and who had occupied our boxes from year to year.

It was remembered then that the Bluebird had come out to drive away the wren who had stolen up to the box several times. A search at my neighbor's box also revealed the pierced eggs near by.

To conclude: It is my opinion that House Wrens and Bluebirds should not be accommodated with homes very near each other; that Bluebirds need help to become established; that a box may be "hoodooed" for sparrows by keeping one a prisoner, a short time, in it.

I hope others will try the swinging box with no near neighbors. They should be put up by March 15 or 20, for I found a brood of Bluebirds out and flying May 8, this year.

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